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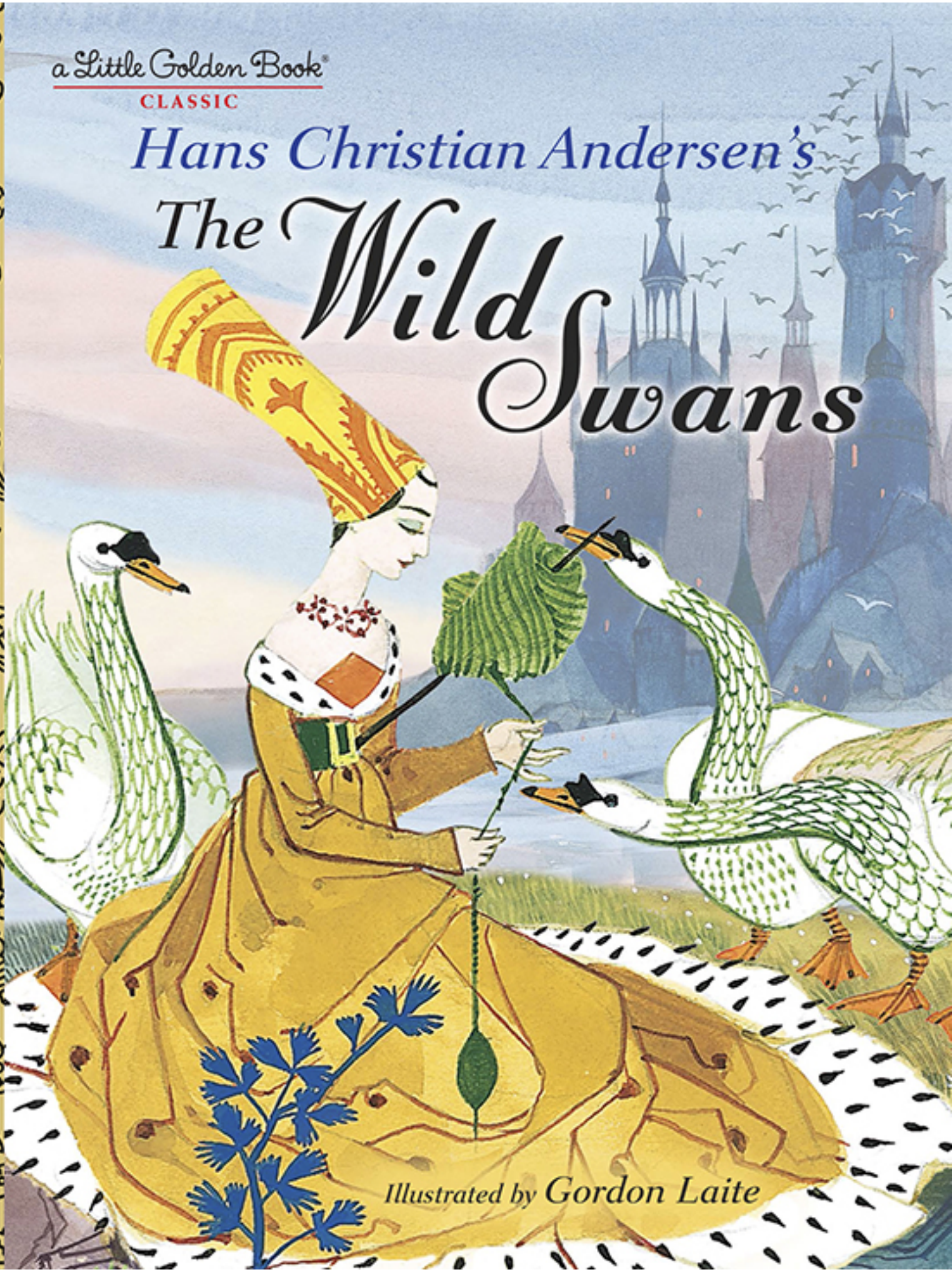
The Wild Swans



Illustrated by Gordon Laite

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Hans Christian Andersen's

The Wild Swans

Adapted by Robin Davies
Illustrated by Gordon Laite

A GOLDEN BOOK • NEW YORK

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Title Page

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First Page

*O*nce there lived a king who had eleven sons and a young daughter named Elisa. The family was very happy together until their mother, the queen, died.

The king married again, but his new queen was not kind or loving to his children.

It was not long before the queen sent Elisa away to live with an old couple in the forest.

"Fly out into the world and get your own living," the wicked queen said to Elisa's brothers. She cast an evil spell, which turned the princes into swans. With a strange cry, they flew out of the palace windows and far away.

The years passed, and Elisa missed her brothers. One day, as she wandered alone in the forest, she met an old woman. “Have you ever seen eleven princes riding through this wood?” she asked.

“No,” replied the old woman, “but I have seen eleven swans floating on the river.”

Elisa ran to the river and waited. When the sun began to set, eleven swans flew down and settled on the riverbank.

As soon as the sun disappeared, the swans' feathers fell off, and eleven handsome princes stood there. Elisa knew that they were her brothers, and ran to them with a happy cry. How glad they were to be together once more!

But sadly, the next morning the princes were turned into swans again, for only at night could they be human. And they told Elisa that the time of year had come, with its long summer days, when they must fly back to their home beyond the sea.

“We cannot leave you here,” they said. So that night they wove a net of willow bark and reeds, and carried Elisa in it over the sea. By sundown the second day, they landed on the shores of a beautiful country.

There the princes found Elisa a dry cave to sleep in. She dreamed of the old woman who had told her of the eleven swans. In her dream, Elisa asked her, “How can I help release my brothers from the evil spell?”

The old woman said, “Take courage, Elisa. You must pick stinging nettles and break them up with your feet. Weave the nettles into eleven coats. When you put the coats on your brothers, they will be freed from the evil spell. But the hardest part is this: you must work without speaking, for if you speak before the coats are finished, your brothers will not live to become human again.”

Elisa woke immediately to find a nettle in her hand. She ran out to the fields to gather more nettles, which stung her delicate fingers. But she would not stop until she had gathered enough to make the coats.

Elisa worked by the light of the moon all that night, stamping the nettles with her feet and then weaving the thread.

The next day, after her brothers had turned back into swans and flown off, Elisa made two coats. All would have been well, but a party of huntsmen found her. One of the huntsmen was the king of that country. He was enchanted by Elisa's beauty, and asked her many questions about herself. But Elisa would not speak.

“You cannot stay here alone in the forest,” the king told Elisa. “Come with me. I will bring you to my castle, where you will be safe.”

Elisa wept as she rode through the mountains on the king's horse, far away from her brothers.

Each day, ladies-in-waiting dressed Elisa in beautiful gowns and wove pearls in her hair. But Elisa could only think of her poor brothers, waiting for her to help them.

The eleven swans swam sadly on the river near the castle. Elisa waved to them each day at sunset as they flew off to the forest for the night. Her brothers wanted to visit her, but they were afraid that the king would be angry with Elisa for welcoming eleven visiting princes.

The king, knowing Elisa was unhappy, sent for the nettle thread and the coats she had made. The sight of them made Elisa feel better. She fell to work at once, and soon she had knitted ten coats. But then Elisa had no thread left. She bravely crept out of the castle at midnight to find more nettles.

A wicked prince had secretly watched Elisa leave the castle. He told the king and his court that Elisa was a witch. Why else would she leave the castle at midnight to pick stinging nettles? he asked.

The king was troubled by what he had heard. “Speak if you are innocent!” he commanded Elisa. But she dared not reply, for the last coat was not yet finished. As the court argued about what to do with Elisa, she slipped away and ran to her room.

Elisa worked quickly to finish the last coat before the eleven swans had to fly to the forest for the night.

The sun was low in the sky as she finished the last coat. She gathered up all eleven coats and ran toward the river, hoping no one would see her. But no sooner was she outside than a crowd spotted her and began to chase her.

Elisa arrived at the river just as the swans were lifting their wings to fly away to the forest.

"Wait, brothers!" she called. The swans settled in a ring around their sister, to protect her.

Elisa tossed the coats over the swans' heads, and immediately they were transformed into eleven splendid princes. Elisa then turned to the king.

"Now I may speak," she said, "for my brothers are saved." And she told the king the story of the spell her brothers had been under, and all she had done to release them from it.

As Elisa spoke, the garden burst into bloom, and the scent of roses filled the air. Now everyone knew that Elisa was not a witch. At the king's elbow swayed a white rose. He picked it and put it into Elisa's hands.

"You are as pure as this rose," he said, "and I want you to be my bride."

Elisa could smile at last, and no one was ever as happy as Elisa and the king on their wedding day.

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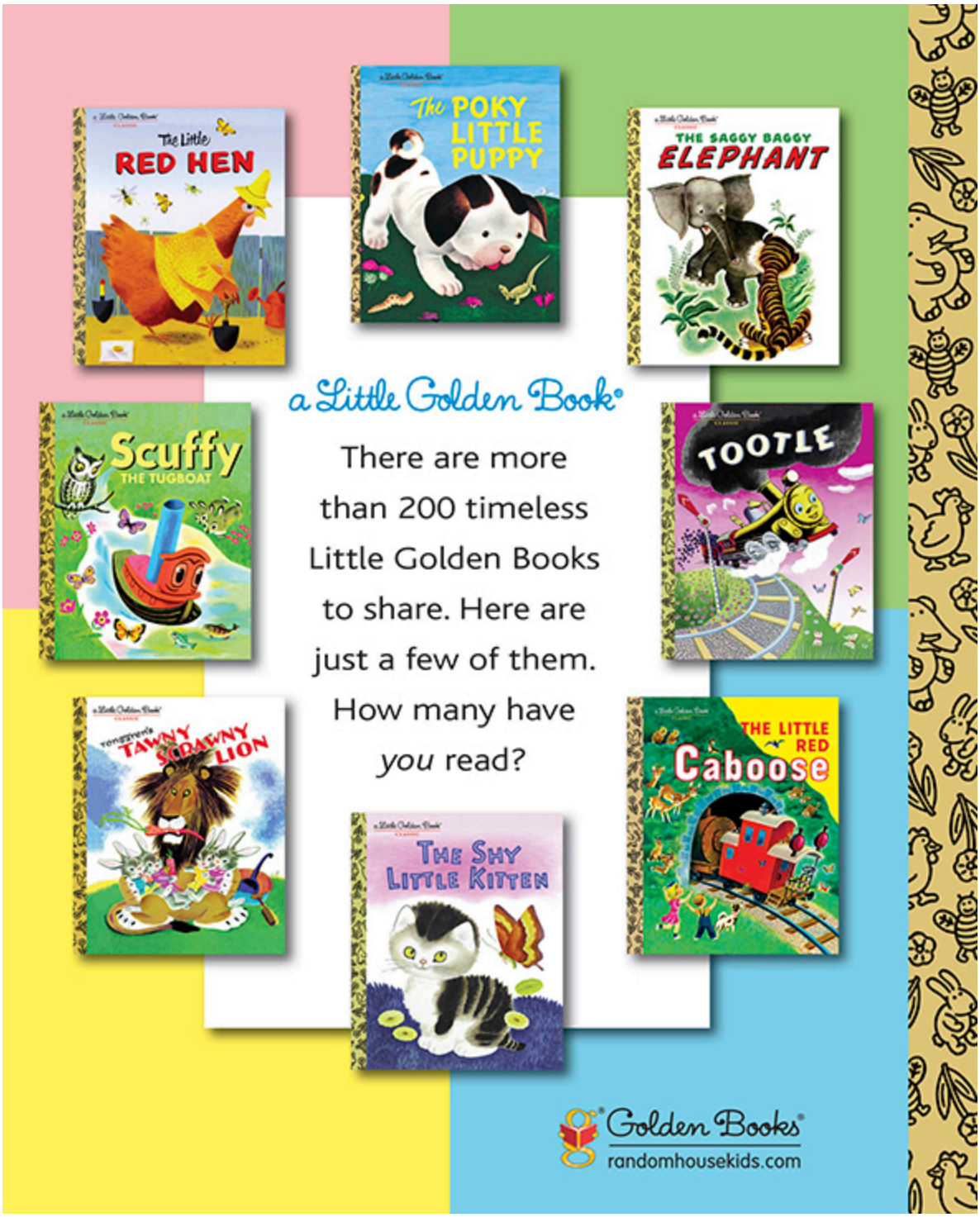
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